Jim McGinlay: Policy and Practise in the Assessment and Management of Floodplain Meadows in England?

For centuries, most floodplains in lowland England were managed as hay meadows to provide feed for livestock. The combination of climatic, hydrological, and soil nutrient conditions, together with the periodic disturbance created by hay cutting and aftermath grazing, led to these meadows being populated by a particular combination of plant species that are now valued and conserved for reasons including their species richness, aesthetic appeal and cultural-historical origins.

This research investigated the meadow-assessment practices of stakeholders actively involved in the management of floodplain meadows in England, in order to ascertain what the nature, motivations and meaning of assessment activity are, and to what extent the assessment activity informs management of meadows within a model of responsive management.

The results highlighted the site-specific nature of the stakeholder networks managing individual meadows. One recurring theme was the tensions between stakeholder groups in terms of how they valued such meadows. Some focussed solely on plant diversity, whilst others were more interested in hay yield. Formal assessment practices tended to be based on plant diversity and as result they only offered a partial view of meadow value. Hay yield and other services supplied by the meadow, such as nutrient trapping, amenity, cultural interest etc., were only assessed informally, if at all.

The resulting partial understanding of the meadow, as derived from these assessments, was then not often used by the stakeholders making management decisions. These decisions were seen to be influenced by a range of other factors including ideas of what constitutes 'traditional management' and the practical constraints of the farming system. Tensions between conservation stakeholders and agricultural stakeholders over meadow value can pose a significant threat to meadow conservation by creating strains in the stakeholder networks that deliver meadow management. The primary risk to the long-term conservation of many sites is the continued participation of local farmers, without whom appropriate management might cease to be feasible. Perhaps their perceptions of meadow value should be more formally integrated into assessment methodologies to ensure they remain involved in the management of meadows and that management becomes more responsive to meadow condition.